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Self-Narrative Inquiry in Teacher Development

Living and Working in Just Institutions

SARA S. GARCIA

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.

Mahatma Gandhi (cf., Gaston, 1984, p. 90)

Historically the cultures of certain ethnic groups in the United States have been rendered invisible in school pedagogy. New stipulations for credentialing in California, however, require teachers to reflect critically upon the meaning of cultural difference, including their own thinking and lived experience as well as the lives, backgrounds, and cultural history of the children they teach. To be effective in culturally diverse classrooms, teachers must confront certain contradictions in their own identity. Most teacher candidates have shaped their identity according to a set of mainstream values and beliefs that has denigrated cultural difference. The personal confrontation with difference and self-identity during the professional development process can be frustrating and painful if preservice teachers have never questioned their social position from the perspective of a belief system that values diversity and the cultural agency of ethnic communities.

For preservice teachers, the process of discovering their own identity requires that they take into consideration and honor the histories that are invisible in school pedagogy, especially the cultural histories of the children in their classroom. Hall's (1991) postmodernist articulation of difference suggests that teacher preparation should theorize a dialectical education process—that is, a praxis of discovery in which teachers recover their own

history and identity in order to assist children from marginalized groups to recover theirs. This requires

... teachers [to] understand the languages which they've been taught not to speak and revalue the traditions and inheritances of cultural expression and creativity. . . . Ethnicity . . . is constructed in history . . . partly through memory, partly through narrative, [and] . . . has to be recovered. It is an act of cultural recovery. (Hall, 1991, p. 12)

Preservice teachers (and teacher educators) need comprehensive professional preparation that requires transformation in their own thinking and in their lives. However, most faculty have not experienced the process of self-narrative reflective inquiry, particularly with regard to cultural knowledge in ethnically diverse communities. They are not likely to make self-narrative reflective inquiry an integral aspect of teacher preparation and are not prepared to become forgers of change. We must further explore how we, as teacher educators, view ourselves as change agents in teacher education. While we challenge mainstream teacher preparation practices and pedagogy through the discourse of "multicultural education," we also must address the ability of preservice and inservice teachers to foster empowerment and voice (Giroux & McLaren, 1986).

As a teacher educator, I experiment with community studies—research that relates to my own heritage and identity as a Mexican American woman (Garcia, 1994, 1995). My research, like recent ethnographic studies conducted by Limon (1994) and Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, and Shannon (1994), informs teacher education practice from an interdisciplinary approach that is an alternative to the deficit model that still predominates. This chapter describes the use of self-narrative inquiry to enable teacher education students at Santa Clara University (SCU)—a Jesuit university in northern California—to explore issues of identity and cultural knowledge through the study of community cultural agency. The chapter proposes that self-narrative inquiry may lead teacher educators toward interdisciplinary models of teacher learning and development in which practice (in education and in the community) informs theory dialectically. That is, one is not independent of the other.

REFLECTION THROUGH INQUIRY AT SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

Sparks-Langer (1992) presents three approaches for understanding teachers' reflective thinking: Cognitive reflection focuses on the knowledge or processes in teacher decision making; critical reflection emphasizes ques-

tioning purposes; and narrative reflection stresses consideration of context factors. Cognitive reflection also includes schemata, an individual's comprehension of the world that is constructed through experience. Knowledge developed through critical reflection is socially and symbolically constructed by the mind through social interaction with others. Finally, knowledge through narrative reflection focuses on teachers' personal interpretations of the circumstances in which they make decisions. Self-narrative inquiry is a form of reflection into one's own "story" that includes making critical, evaluative judgments regarding one's own schemata.

Teacher educators at SCU have integrated modes of reflection that generate cultural knowledge and awareness through critical inquiry (King, 1991; King & Ladson-Billings, 1990). My contribution has been to emphasize various modes of critical introspection or self-narrative inquiry that are more deeply grounded in teacher candidates' learning and experiences, particularly in ethnic communities. As Richert (1992) states:

As teachers talk about their work and "name" their experiences, they learn about what they know and what they believe. They also learn what they do not know. Such knowledge empowers the individual by providing a source for action that is generated from within rather than imposed from without. (p. 196)

Thus, a larger purpose for using reflection and self-narrative inquiry is to develop candidates' individual agency, critical thinking ability, as well as cultural knowledge of the communities in which they will teach.

Cultural Knowledge and Undergraduate Preparation

The ideal pool of candidates for any credential program in California includes representatives of all ethnic groups in the public schools. Given the low numbers of students of color in most teacher credential programs, it is difficult to design collaborative activities that permit teacher candidates to learn about cultural difference, identity, and community agency from one another.

Typically, credential candidates come into SCU's teacher education graduate (fifth-year) program with diverse levels of cultural knowledge. Approximately 50% of each year's candidates completed their undergraduate studies at SCU; 40% have undergraduate degrees from a University of California campus or a California State University campus; and the remaining 10% are from other states, are second career re-entry students, or are former homemakers. During the admissions interview, we determine whether applicants have worked with culturally and linguistically diverse students. The admissions process does not permit us to assess how well informed

applicants are regarding their own culture or other cultures. Experience tutoring inner-city school children, for example, does not necessarily indicate that candidates have developed cultural knowledge that can inform their teaching practice in culturally diverse communities.

Even though credential candidates may have taken undergraduate courses in ethnic studies, cultural anthropology, or sociolinguistics, such courses usually cannot be considered transformative in relation to the candidates' understanding of teaching and learning. Every credential candidate, regardless of ethnic background, should have taken, as a general educational requirement, some ethnic studies courses or had a community-based field experience during his or her undergraduate education. At SCU, the East Side Project offers community-based learning and service experiences that are in keeping with the Jesuit mission's emphasis on social justice. In my experience, students who have this kind of prior preparation for teacher education are better prepared than those who have not had these experiences to respond to readings, discussions, and written essay exams related to critical analysis of social and political issues in foundations courses.

Generally, the lived experience of *ethnically identified* students is a solid foundation from which candidates can begin to reflect critically on issues related to cultural knowledge and community agency. These students often have an intuitive sense of the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse students and demonstrate sensitivity toward other ethnic communities. Still, upon entering our program, these students may have little formal knowledge of their own communities. Listen to the "voice" of one credential candidate:

As an African American high school student, I never learned enough about the Harlem Renaissance to pass a test on it, nor enough facts and details to formulate an accurate picture of African American life within the United States at that time. Without knowing the historical social climate, without being told how much of the music and writing arose out of that social context, I (and many other "brothers" and "sisters") had no incentive to look towards the art[s] as a record of the history that had always eluded us. (MC, 1995 credential candidate)

Unfortunately, only one or two students from each of the three main ethnic groups in California (Latino, African American, and Asian American) usually participate in our program. Because these students often feel like "tokens," they experience a certain amount of alienation during their professional preparation. Thus, ethnically identified students are more likely than other students to know from their lived experience the dire need for well-prepared teachers who are knowledgeable and effective with students from ethnic communities.

COMMUNITY-BASED IMMERSION EXPERIENCES AND SELF-NARRATIVE INQUIRY

SCU credential candidates' first reflective learning experience begins in the Immersion Experience course. When this course was initiated in 1988, as a one-week orientation retreat, student teams were assigned to conduct ethnographic observations in selected communities.

The Original Immersion Experience

Each team, equipped with a map, drove around a given community, stopped at assigned locations (e.g., a "mom and pop" ethnic store or a gas station), and made notes of what they saw. In most cases the candidates conducted their community observations in the neighborhoods where they would eventually student teach.

Despite a culminating debriefing session that included reflective group discussion of their observations, candidates emphasized negative aspects of the communities they "visited" during this experience. Their observations distanced them from the people who actually lived there. For instance, students described ethnic markets as unkempt and disorganized, and identified economically linked conditions, such as a large number of liquor stores in a given community, wrecked cars parked in driveways and poor yard maintenance, few public parks, and high unemployment, without any understanding of the circumstances that create these phenomena. These reactions demonstrate the need for a more effective method of teaching students about diversity and ethnic and economically impoverished communities—one that dispels rather than reinforces cultural deficit interpretations of ethnic communities.

Although this experience was designed to begin reflection and inquiry from a critical standpoint, the Immersion Experience was not followed up throughout the year. Candidates needed opportunities for critical reflection grounded in a developmental process model of inquiry that aids the recovery of identity and the discovery of community agency—a more naturalistic learning process that develops a deeper understanding of cultural difference (King, 1994, 1995). Consequently, we now place more emphasis on cognitive reflection through self-narrative inquiry that is systematically integrated into the overall teaching and learning process of the credential program.

The Revised Immersion Experience

In 1994 we reorganized the Immersion Experience into a comprehensive, structured, field-based course that provides a basis for continual self-

reflection and community-based experiential learning. This three-unit course is ongoing throughout the academic year and provides opportunities for cognitive and critical reflection through a variety of group experiences and self-narrative inquiry assignments. By examining their own growth and development concerning issues related to their observations, field assignments, and student teaching, candidates see and experience connections between the academic world and the real world. Immersion assignments include observations, participation in school restructuring, and community involvement. For example, candidates participate in interagency collaboration; teach in nontraditional education settings like juvenile court school tutoring programs; assist in employment training centers; and work in soup kitchens, in homeless shelters, and on crisis lines.

Through self-narrative inquiry assignments (directed observations and journal writing) and reflective group processes in courses and field experiences (guided discussion and systematic debriefing), candidates examine their initial perceptions in required practicums and gauge the change in their perceptions, cultural knowledge and awareness, and teaching practices in relation to ethnic "others." The self-narrative inquiry assignments, which require candidates to form personal, academic, and professional goals, inform this relation between theory and practice. For instance, at the beginning and end of the school year, in a group reflective activity, candidates generate a metaphor to describe the change in their perceptions and feelings during the school year. The ultimate goal of self-narrative inquiry is transformation of perceptions and practice through the development of cultural knowledge.

The Immersion Experience provides valuable opportunities to learn about and experience theory-practice linkages such as cultural agency in ethnic communities. We reiterate this concept throughout the year to help candidates recognize community cultural constants and the dynamics of change—how cultural constants sustain and change cultural identities, for example, and maintain and transmute culture through historical processes. In sum, faculty also encourage candidates to appreciate the need to develop flexibility in their life-long learning process and to view themselves as agents of change in their own lives, in society, and in history.

COLLABORATION AND INQUIRY IN TWO FOUNDATIONS COURSES

In a recent report on the Internet's *Report Card* (May 22, 1995), Ann Lieberman, a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, discussed the need for a "radical rethinking" of teacher development. Lieberman posits

that "most educators agree that American students need a wide array of learning opportunities that engage students in experiencing, creating and solving real problems, using their own experiences, and working with others." Yet, according to Lieberman, these opportunities are denied teachers when they shift to a learner role. Inquiry-based models tend to emphasize analysis within learning environments rather than analysis of one's own learning (Zeichner, 1983).

The problem begins with the conditioned learning process to which preservice teachers are subjected as undergraduate students. Students enter credential programs with constructions and schemata already formed about teaching and learning. To overcome years of didactic methods, these learners need to develop the ability to recognize their own learning processes through exploration, experimentation, and discovery (Cannella & Reiff, 1994). Instead, by the time they enroll in graduate study at SCU, the majority of credential candidates expect to be lectured to in classes; they expect to be told what and how to think!

Critical reflection begins with an examination of how students are conditioned to think in traditional, competitive environments that engender limited opportunities for understanding their own cognitive development and for life-long learning to occur. Ultimately, the goal is to develop cognitive mapping skills, by synthesizing difficult concepts, making associations among concepts, and developing practical knowledge that constitutes a strong, holistic foundation for teaching and learning.

I teach two foundations courses: Psychological Foundations of Education and Second and First Language Acquisition Theory. Both courses deal with a critical examination of learning theories, especially as they pertain to linguistically and culturally diverse learners. I use the *Learning Thru Discussion* (LTD) format (Hill, 1977), which requires students to be prepared to discuss the issues presented in the readings in small discussion groups in a structured manner with an assigned group leader. Rules for group behavior are determined by the students. For instance, group members who are not prepared for discussion take notes and present a summation at the end of the session. The students are expected to define difficult concepts and discuss their individual comprehension of the readings assigned for a given day.

The discussion leader usually provides an outline of the readings and formulates probing questions to guide the conversation. The leader's most important responsibility is to generate discussion and guide it from one topic to another. Every student gets an opportunity to lead a discussion. This format provides learners with a guide for critically exploring the issues presented in the lecture and the concepts presented in the readings.

Students maintain a reflective narrative journal of their thinking to document the process of making associations among concepts presented in

class. In this journal they are asked to examine their perceptions of issues in relation to what they observe in their field experience and how their culture, whether identified in terms of their identified ethnicity or as mainstream American culture, has contributed to their perceptions of teaching and learning. Students share their journal entries with the entire class. These narratives usually exemplify a process of growth in learning about issues such as ethnic identity, controversial sociopolitical issues related to cognition and linguistic policy, their personal dilemmas, fears, and insecurities about teaching. A myriad of unexpected perceptions usually emerge in these narratives, especially as related to controversial issues like the "English-only initiative," testing and achievement, and ability grouping. Usually, through constant examination of their preconceived notions of learning, from course readings, discussion, and narrative and reflective inquiry, the majority of students change their initial perceptions.

Preservice teachers conduct a case study of a student in the classroom where they observe or student teach. They are required to use the theories presented in class by systematically observing a situation in which they can identify a practice that reflects their comprehension of a given theory. For instance, when working with bilingual students, the use of code switching from one language to another and the context of the switch are examined based on the sociolinguistic theories discussed in class that address the learning environment and the perceptions held by the teacher with regard to language use in the classroom. The final project is a team assignment in which preservice teachers present interpretations based on the knowledge they gained by participating in class activities. Each team member prepares a paper that contributes to an assigned theme. In the Second and First Language Acquisition Theory course, preservice teachers are expected to develop working units that are guided theoretically by at least one of the Crosscultural, Language and Academic Development (CLAD) domains in the California credentialing emphasis requirement. (See Chapter 15, this volume, for a description of these requirements.) The selected domains—second language acquisition, ESL methods, or cross-cultural diversity—have to be articulated, substantiated, and supported based on assigned readings.

Preservice teachers are encouraged to exceed their *zone of proximal development*, according to Vygotskian principles (Moll, 1993). By the end of the course, students will have acquired a foundation for reflective learning by reading and participating in class discussions and by examining, through narrative inquiry, their own learning process. Applying their growing knowledge of teaching through experiential case studies and group project assignments provides them with additional experience as reflective thinkers, researchers, and classroom teachers. These experiences build a foundation for their life-long professional learning.

THE NARRATIVE VOICE OF PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

Three student teachers working in the same school district collaboratively prepared lessons to teach about culture through music. One of the students, who has a genuine love for jazz music, traced the Harlem Renaissance through the evolution of jazz artists and motivated the students by connecting the evolution of jazz to artistic rap and then to the historical contributions of African Americans in literature. Langston Hughes's poetry and other forms of literature and popular culture were used to develop the literacy skills of the culturally diverse high school students. This exemplifies the effective use of critical reflection on the human condition through historical, political, and artistic devices for teaching. These candidates were transformed through this collaborative process of cognitive and critical reflective inquiry.

The following excerpt illustrates how the preservice teachers viewed the concept of cultural constants:

One cultural constant has been the legacy of communalism that defines . . . African American life: "one is not a human being except as he [or she] is part of a social order" (King, 1994). Through the art of the Harlem Renaissance, students would find that the values they have are not without a history—a foundation. . . . With so much civil unrest in certain African American neighborhoods, it would be good if the children could take home the concept of shared perceptions, values, and behaviors, being motivated to incorporate them into their own structures of family and friends. (Team Project Final Report)

Grounded in a theoretical understanding of African American culture that eschews cultural deficit interpretations (King, 1994), the report discusses how teachers can incorporate such cultural constants into their pedagogy: "The teacher of this unit would do good to make use of this time-honored tradition [communalism] by providing opportunities for pupils to engage in cooperative group activities."

In an attempt to capture the final thoughts of candidates concerning their experiences during the credential process and their feelings about becoming teachers, we asked for a closing self-narrative inquiry. The underlying purpose of this activity was to see whether candidates discussed cultural knowledge with regard to teacher preparation. (Most of them did address this concept.) Narrative theory predicts "disorderly" experiences, especially when catalyzing experiences fundamentally change subjects' political consciousness (Kohler-Riessman, 1994). In theoretical terms, narratives do not mirror a world "out there." They are constructed, creatively authored, rhe-

torical, interpretive, and replete with assumptions (Kohler-Riessman, 1994). As Richert (1992) observes, teachers can

draw on what they know and believe as they enter the world of schools. Similarly, they can prepare themselves for responsible work that is responsive to the increasingly complex demands of teaching in the twenty-first century. Preparing teachers to exercise their voices prepares them to act with agency in their own lives. (p. 197)

If this process of preservice teacher development through self-narrative inquiry is continued into the first year of teaching, perhaps new teachers will continue to grow in ways that will make a difference in the quality of schooling for all students, including culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

CONCLUSION

The SCU teacher education program is constantly changing in order to better prepare teachers who are responsive to the needs of all learners. In California the notion that teachers should have a strong foundation of cultural knowledge concerning the students in their classrooms, who mostly come from cultures different from the teachers', is not new. Teacher educators must be able to determine whether prospective teachers are sufficiently sensitive to cultural difference to be effective teachers in diverse settings. We must understand how teachers acquire and use cultural knowledge as a basis for constructing learning environments that are responsive to cultural dimensions of learning. We must determine how undergraduate ethnic studies courses and community-based learning can contribute to the knowledge and experiences teachers need. Furthermore, we must assess teachers' sensitivity to the multiplicity of meanings or "intertextual" cultural expressions through which lived experiences affect learning (Hoffer Gosselin, 1978). Culture changes and transmutes our cultural identities in complex ways that require constant awareness of the process of social change. Ricoeur (1992) states that the task of the changing Self requires "living well with and for others in just institutions." Teacher development and growth is a complex and dynamic process that warrants further investigation in this direction.